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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: NON-SERB MINORITIES AMBIVALENT ABOUT
DECENTRALIZATION, WARY OF MANIPULATIONS IN STATUS TALKS

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Summary

1. (SBU) Kosovo's non-Serb minority leaders are glad to be involved in the status negotiations in Vienna and generally pleased with the work of the Communities Consultative Council, but are concerned about what they see as Belgrade's efforts to manipulate non-Serb minority issues for its own advantage in status talks. Most non-Serb minority leaders were emphatic in recent meetings about wanting to decide on the creation of predominantly minority municipalities through discussions with Kosovar leaders in Pristina rather than through negotiations with Belgrade, but were concerned about the impact of redistricting on the minorities left behind in even-more-predominantly Albanian areas. END SUMMARY.

Minority Government Members Blast Belgrade's "Manipulations"

2. (SBU) In meetings with poloff during May 11-12, representatives of the Turkish and Bosniak "Six Plus" coalition, consisting of the Kosovo Democratic Turkish Party (KDTP) and the Bosniak coalition Vakaf, were concerned about what they regard as Belgrade's attempts to "manipulate" non-Serb minority issues. Prizren deputy mayors Ercan Spat (KDTP) and Cemal Kurtisi (Vakat), KDTP President and Kosovo Assembly Presidency member Mahir Yagcilar, and Health Minister Sadik Idrizi--who also has represented non-Serb minorities at the decentralization talks in Vienna--stressed that the Belgrade team's recent forays into non-Serb minority issues, and especially its inclusion of a Gorani representative on its delegation to the last meeting in Vienna, put minorities in Kosovo in an awkward position by implying that non-Serb minorities look to Belgrade to defend them and by usurping the authority of Kosovo's elected non-Serb minority representatives to represent their own constituents. The Six Plus leaders told poloff they have their own legitimate representatives, and can best represent themselves without manipulations from outside. Xhevdet Neziraj, a Kosovo Assembly member and President of Kosovo's ethnic Egyptian party, the New Initiative for a Democratic

Kosovo (IRDK), which is part of Kosovo's governing coalition by virtue of its membership in the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo's (AAK) parliamentary group, made similar points to poloff in a May 17 meeting.

¶3. (SBU) Idrizi noted that Belgrade's opening of the non-Serb minority municipality issue at the May 4-5 negotiation session had put him in an awkward position, since the agreement among Kosovo's non-Serb minorities to settle decentralization issues in Pristina without involving Belgrade had left him without a mandate to negotiate the issue with Belgrade. He also emphasized that his own party won the largest number of Gorani/Bosniak votes in Dragas municipality, the population center of the Gorani community and the territory of Belgrade's proposed Gorani municipality, and so contended that he is the legitimate representative of Gorani interests. Denouncing what he characterized as Belgrade's attempt to establish an entity structure, Idrizi argued that the Belgrade proposal to make his home region of Gora into a separate municipality would be detrimental to the interests of his fellow Gorani, since the re-creation of the Gora municipality--created in the Milosevic era and abolished in 1999--would alienate ethnic Albanians. He argued instead for the creation of two municipal subunits, one predominantly ethnic Albanian and the other predominantly Gorani, that would both have Dragas town as their municipal center. Neziraj similarly noted that the Belgrade proposal for a Roma municipality in Mitrovica had never been raised by the Kosovo Assembly Roma representative, either in Kosovo institutions or in the deliberations of the Communities Consultative Council, and criticized the move by Belgrade as an attempt to "manipulate" vulnerable communities.

Gorani Community Divided, Concerned

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¶4. (SBU) The Gorani community is divided over how best to represent its interests in the Vienna talks more broadly. Some Gorani, like Idrizi, consider the Gorani to be a subset of (or at least related to) the broader Bosniak community, and tend to see the community's interests as best served by closer relations with Kosovo's Bosniaks and ethnic Albanians. The Citizens' Initiative of Gora (GIG), led by Rustem Ibisi, tends to be somewhat closer to Belgrade but is internally divided on its approach to the negotiations; Ibisi has long voiced concern that the Gorani are ignored by Pristina and their interests poorly served by its institutions, but also is worried that the party should not cooperate too closely with Serbian authorities for fear of further eroding the Goranis' already rocky relations with ethnic Albanians. A member of the GIG executive board told polfsn that Ibisi did not endorse the participation in negotiations of Jasim Isaki, the Gorani representative on the Belgrade team (though he does support a Gorani municipality), but that the executive board had done so in order to prevent the appointment of a more controversial figure such as Ibro Vait, who has lived in Belgrade since his participation on the Serbian delegation to the Rambouillet negotiations in 1999. The executive board chairman said that the GIG was keeping Isaki on a short leash, requiring him to report back to the executive board and not sign any documents without its approval.

Minorities Ambivalent on Decentralization

¶5. (SBU) Kosovo's non-Serb minorities have voiced mixed views of decentralization. All strongly favor some means of increasing the local role in self-government and their own communities' influence over local issues, but they are divided and uncertain over the best means of doing so due to demographic concerns and party politics. Yagcilar, Idrizi, and the KDTP and Vakati leaders in Prizren noted that the predominantly Turkish municipality pilot project of Mamusa has been a mixed blessing; the residents of Mamusa are

pleased at their increased self-government, but Turks in Prizren town now are more isolated as a smaller minority in a more predominantly Albanian municipality. The Turks' long history in Prizren and good relations with their neighbors have insulated them from any particularly negative consequences of this isolation, but their leaders worry that the reduced percentage of Turks may jeopardize their ability to use the Turkish language for official interactions and their ability to achieve critical mass for purposes such as Turkish-language education. Vakrat leaders voiced similar concerns, noting that Bosniak leaders had proposed the creation of a municipality in Prizren's Zupa valley, centered in the town of Recane, that would include 13-15,000 people with an ethnic composition of 80 percent Bosniaks, 15 percent Albanians, four percent Serbs, and one percent Turks. They are concerned, however, that the inclusion of 70 percent of Prizren's Bosniaks in such a municipality would leave the other 30 percent isolated and vulnerable to emigration or assimilation with Albanians.

16. (SBU) Idrizi and Neziraj also pointed out that demographics, particularly the wide but shallow distribution of some minority communities, make the creation of predominantly minority municipalities difficult. Idrizi pointed out that Vitomirica--the hometown of rival Bosniak politician Numan Balic, who wants it to become a municipality--is only 46 percent Bosniak, according to UNHCR.

A majority-minority municipality could be created by including nearby Serb villages of Siga and Brestovik, but the municipality's long-term non-Albanian majority would still be in doubt. Neziraj noted that the same pattern applies to the Egyptian community, which is geographically dispersed and would not be certain to form a majority even in the proposed "Egyptian" municipality of Rugova e Hasit in Gjakova/Djakovica municipality. Neziraj, an economist, further doubted that majority-Egyptian municipalities would be in the Egyptian community's interest (or in the interest of other communities with similar economic difficulties and geographic dispersement, such as the Roma and Ashkali), since

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the communities tend to live in poor areas of predominantly Albanian towns and would face both districting and economic challenges to the viability of municipalities.

17. (SBU) For these reasons, the Six Plus and IRDK leaders unanimously favored the creation of a system of decentralization that would create multiple submunicipal units in existing municipalities to bring some governing functions closer to citizens while avoiding splitting off minorities from existing municipalities. "What we need is full integration, not separation," stressed Neziraj. The Six Plus leaders noted that such a system would allow the sharing of some functions--for instance, high schools--among minority members in different submunicipal units while allowing greater local-level governance.

Next Steps at Vienna Talks: Representation by Expertise

18. (SBU) The community leaders told poloff that Idrizi's tenure on the Vienna team was specific to the issue of decentralization and that they intended to choose different representatives to represent them on different issues. They noted that some minority representatives, such as Democratic Ashkali Party of Kosovo (PDAK) leader Sabit Rrahmani and Party of Democratic Action (SDA) leader Numan Balic, had argued that the non-Serb minority government and opposition parties should alternate in sending representatives, but most of the non-Serb minority leaders preferred to choose representatives for each issue based on their expertise. They noted that Yagcilar would be the representative at upcoming discussions of minority protections and constitutional issues, and Neziraj, an economist, would represent them at any future economic discussions.

Mostly Content with Communities Consultative Council, Though
Some Criticisms Remain

¶9. (SBU) The minority leaders unanimously characterized the Communities Consultative Council chaired by Veton Surroi and its April meeting in Durrës, Albania as positive steps, though some criticized the lack of greater feedback to the Council from the Unity Team. Leaders from each of the communities also noted that Balic had been a divisive force on the Council in that he tended to hijack discussions of important issues to try to score points against rivals on the fractious Kosovar Bosniak political scene. That said, all intended to continue to participate and respected Surroi's willingness to take on the issue, though they hoped the Council would function more smoothly in the future.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT. Kosovo minority leaders are glad to be involved in the negotiations process, especially to have a representative in the Vienna negotiations, and are anxious to ensure that their communities' unique interests do not get lost in the shuffle or, worse, exploited for the political purposes of others as the Kosovar and Serbian delegations stake out their opposing positions. They strongly favor decentralization but would prefer a system of municipal subunits that would not sever small populations of their communities from larger community population centers. Most prefer to decide decentralization issues within Kosovo and to avoid addressing their communities' particular interests in discussions with Belgrade, though some vulnerable communities--the Gorani in particular--feel marginalized and are divided over what strategy to adopt to improve their situation. END COMMENT.

¶11. (U) Post clears this cable in its entirety for passage to UN Special Representative Ahtisaari.
GOLDBERG